



4-2-1943

Community Analysis Report No. 4: Notes on Japanese holidays, April 1943

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GUY W. COOK
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TO: Project Staff

APR 2 1943

SUBJECT: Japanese Holidays

On some of the centers the question has arisen as to what Japanese holidays are of special importance and in particular what if any Japanese holidays should be recognized as relocation center holidays. Under present policy no Japanese holiday shall be recognized as such by declaring a holiday from work because of it. However, if center residents desire to observe certain festivals after working hours there is no reason why they should not do so. In this way relocation center practice may be on the same basis as that of ordinary American communities including those of California and Hawaii before the war.

For your information, a summary list and description of the chief Japanese holidays is attached. Some of the dates are of little social importance in this country but are listed because they appear in the Japanese official calendar. Other days, such as Boy Day (May 5), or Goshoki (November 22-28), not on the official calendar, may be important as family or religious festivals.

D. S. Myer
Director

Attachment

NOTES ON JAPANESE HOLIDAYS

Community Analysis Report No. 4

April 2, 1943

January 1 - New Year's Day (Shogatsu)

This is the biggest holiday of the year in both Japan and China. The Japanese overseas also like to celebrate New Year's with banquets and the drinking of rice wine (sake). It is traditional to make rice dumplings (mochi) for New Year's Day and for friends and relatives to visit one another at this time. Older people may visit the local Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines to make an offering and recite a prayer. Graveyards may be visited and sometimes a priest is called in to purify the house for the coming year.

Debts for the old year are traditionally paid up before midnight on December 31.

New Year's festivities usually last 3 days.

January 15 - Small New Year's (Koshogatsu)

This is not generally observed by the Japanese in this country. In rural areas of Japan ceremonies associated with good crops for the coming year are practiced at this time.

February - First Day of the Horse (calculated by the Asiatic zodiac)

This is a folk holiday in honor of Inari, the diety of good crops and prosperity. In Japan and in parts of Hawaii and the West Coast shrines to Inari may be found, attended chiefly by older people. Inari's messenger is the fox and the diety himself is sometimes miscalled the fox god. While Inari is a Shinto diety, Inari priests are more faith healers than practitioners of the nationalistic types of Shinto.

February 11 - Empire Foundation Day (Kigensetsu)

This is an official holiday in Japan honoring the ascension to the throne of Jimmu Tenno on February 11, 660 B.C. Emperor Jimmu, according to official Japanese historians, was the first "historic" ruler of Japan. This date is not important among the Japanese in this country.

March 3 - Girl Day or Doll Festival (Hina Matsuri)

This is a family holiday for people with girl children, especially girls born during the past year. The family may invite friends and relatives to a party in honor of their daughters. The guests send gifts of dolls which are put together with other dolls on display before a special alcove, the tokonoma.

Girl Day is one of a series of special holidays called sekku, which occur on odd numbered months. The third of the third month (Girl Day), the fifth of the fifth month (Boy Day), and the seventh of the seventh month (Tanabata) are the most important of these sekku. Girl Day is sometimes called "Momo Sekku" or Peach Festival, the peach being a Japanese symbol for woman.

March 21 - Spring Equinox Festival

The Shinto observance of this is called Shunki Korei Sai and the Buddhist holiday is called Higan. The Higan observances are more important in most Japanese communities. There are usually special services in the Buddhist temples at this time. In this country the Spring Higan is usually celebrated in Buddhist temples on the nearest Sunday.

April 3 - The Death Day of Jimmu Tenno (Jimmu Tenno Sai)

A Japanese official holiday, but of no importance in Japanese communities in this country.

April 8 - Buddha's Birthday

This is a Buddhist holiday of some importance. In Japan at this time many Buddhist temples set up small figures of Buddha over which an herbal liquid called sweet tea (amacha) is poured. Visitors to the temple may take home some of the liquid as a cure for aches and pains. Buddha's birthday is often observed by special services and ceremonies in Buddhist churches in this country also.

April 29 - The Emperor's Birthday (Tencho Setsu)

This is an official holiday in Japan. The date, of course, varies with the birthday of the reigning emperor. The Emperor's birthday used to be fairly widely observed in Japanese communities on the West Coast, but this practice was on the wane during recent years. Undoubtedly a number of families will observe it privately in the centers.

May 5 - Boy Day (Tango No Sekku or Koi Nobori)

This is a family festival in honor of boys, similar in nature to Girl Day for girls. In both Japan and the United States families with boys observe the holiday by flying colored banners and large red paper carp from poles outside their houses. The carp is a symbol of the Japanese male because it swims upstream, overcoming all obstacles in its way; when about to die it does not wriggle.

July 7 - Tanabata (another of the Sekku)

This holiday is in honor of the stars Vega and Altair, which figure in a story of two lovers who meet on this day. The holiday is not generally observed by Japanese in this country.

July 15 - Bon or Obon

This is a festival almost equal in importance to New Year's Day. At this time, by Japanese Buddhist tradition, the spirits of the dead return to their former homes. There are special services at the temples and in the homes. Graveyards are visited and tidied up and special offerings are made before the ancestral tablets (ihai) in the household Buddhist shelf (butsudan).

Neighbors call on families observing Hatsu Bon or first Bon, i.e., families that have lost a member through death during the past year.

In most parts of Japan special dances called Bon Odori are performed at this time which usually commence early in the evening and last many hours. These dances are the occasion of much festivity, older people drinking freely and young people often finding occasion to flirt with their sweethearts.

In the United States Bon is also observed in Japanese communities, and special services may be held at the Buddhist temple. The Bon dances have also been maintained but the night chosen for a dance in a particular community may be any time in late July or August for economic convenience.

It may be expected that residents of relocation centers will desire to celebrate the Bon season just as they wish to observe New Year's.

September 5 - Moon Festival

This is chiefly observed in rural areas in Japan and is of little importance among Japanese communities in this country.

September 23 - Autumn Equinox Festival

The Shinto observance of this is called Shunki Korei Sai and the Buddhist Higan (the same terms as are used for the Spring Equinox Festival). Fall Higan is an important Buddhist holiday in Japan and is also observed by the Buddhists in this country. Special ceremonies are held in the Buddhist churches, usually on the nearest Sunday.

October 17 - Harvest Thanksgiving to the Dieties of Ise (Kannano Sai)

An official holiday in Japan but of little importance to the Japanese in this country.

November 3 - Meiji's Birthday (Meiji Setsu)

Meiji was one of the outstanding emperors of Japan. He held office from 1868 to 1912, a period which began with the overthrow of the old feudal regime and during which great changes occurred in Japan. The day is an important one in Japan, especially in the schools where Meiji's rescript on education is read during special ceremonies in Meiji's honor.

In this country Meiji Day is not marked by any special activity.

November 23 - Harvest Festival of the Imperial House (Niiname Sai)

An official holiday in Japan but of little importance to the people in this country.

November 22-28 - Goshoki

This is an important religious week to the Shinshu Buddhists in honor of St. Shinran (1173 - 1262 A.D.), the founder of the sect. Special services are held at Buddhist temples during this period. Shinshu (Hongwanji) is the most important of the Japanese Buddhist sects in this country.

December 8 - Bodi Day

A Buddhist holiday in honor of St. Bodi Dharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism.

December 14 - The Anniversary of the Raid on Lord Kira's Residence by the Forty-Seven Ronin

The historic tale often recited in story and acted out in drama is briefly as follows: A feudal lord, Asano, was to be instructed in the proper etiquette for an audience with the Shogun by one Lord Kira. Lord Kira, however, deliberately mis-instructed Asano so that when he had his audience with the Shogun, his behavior was shamefully wrong. As a result Asano had to commit ceremonial suicide in order to save his honor, but just before doing so he told his followers of Lord Kira's treachery. The followers, now ronin, or masterless Samurai, resolved to take vengeance on Lord Kira who was, however, on guard against Asano's men. The leader of the ronin, according to a plan arranged with the rest, allowed himself to be seen in the company of prostitutes and drunkards, while the rest of the men dispersed and found themselves various jobs. Then years later when Lord Kira was convinced that all danger of retribution was past and that the leader had lost all self-respect and gone to the dogs the company gathered according to plan, stormed Kira's house and killed him. After doing so they committed suicide. These men are all heroes in Japan because of their great demonstration of loyalty.

December 25 - Death Day of the Emperor Taisho (Taisho Tenno Sai)

An official holiday simply as the death day of the emperor who reigned just previously to the one now in office. It is of little importance in Japan and none at all in this country.



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